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On the first Kenya record of the Shy Albatross *Diomedea cauta*

by G. R. Cunningham-van Someren

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Through the kindness of Professor Mohd Haider of the Department of Zoology of the University of Nairobi, the National Museums of Kenya received a fine specimen of the Shy Albatross *Diomedea cauta*. The bird had been caught in fishing nets off Mombasa on 14 November 1986. It subsequently died and was deep frozen. It was heavily oiled and so discoloured as to be hardly recognizable; however Mr Kithele, technician at the Department of Ornithology, spent 2 days cleaning it up and restoring it to almost pristine condition. The specimen is a near adult female with skull not fully ossified.

Description

Bill colour faded to almost overall grey. Maxillary unguis black. Culminicorn with yellow tinge and latericorn yellow tinged, with a bright yellow lower margin. Ramicorn grey tinged pink, more so at the base and toward sulcus. Mandibular unguis black. Head: frons to crown white, a narrow dark mark over eye to base of naricorn. Nape, hindneck to dorsal surface and back to rump light grey to white. Upper tail-coverts white. Tail very dark grey. Chin, throat, breast and flanks white. Undertail-coverts white. Wing, upper surface, all coverts to greater coverts very dark grey almost black. Primaries and secondaries black with inner web white at base, but with wholly black tips. Underwing-coverts white. Secondaries undersurface white narrowly tipped grey-black, 2.0 cm wide, marginally tipped dark grey, 2.0 cm wide. Underwing appears white with a narrow dark leading and trailing edge, which is diagnostic

in comparison with the similar Black-browed Albatross *Diomedea melanophrys*. Tarsus to web and toes pink, claws white.

Size

Culmen 136 mm. Maxillary unguis 31 mm, depth 31 mm. Mandibular unguis 31 mm. Laticorn 110 mm with narrowest dorsal surface culminicorm to base ramicorn 28 mm. Wing 61 mm. Span 246 cm. Width at secondaries from leading to trailing edge at proximal end of radius/ulna 19 cm, up to 24 cm at carpo-metacarpal joint. Radius/ulna length 32.5 cm, carpo-metacarpus 31 cm, humerus 12.7 cm. Tarsus 93 mm, through to mid toe less claw, 132 mm. Web spread 132 mm. Tail (tips abraded) 22 cm. Caudal vertebrae + pygostyle 8 cm.

Weight 2.4 kg. Very emaciated. Crop and alimentary system virtually empty with only a few small fish bones and scales plus the remains of beaks of Cephalopods.

Discussion

This bird was carefully skinned and all major bones of wing and leg extracted and together with the body will be converted into osteological specimens.

The Kenya Meteorological Department reports on the weather around the time of capture as follows: "Mozambique channel, easterly to north easterly winds converging over Madagascar by 1200 UTC was a common phenomenon during the period. Around 14 November, there was a low pressure system over Madagascar and another east of Seychelles, however these systems were not deep enough to qualify to be called cyclones. By 24 November the low pressure system over Madagascar had filled and the quasi permanent anticyclone over south west Indian Ocean had intensified. Between 14 November and 24, there were persistent reports of thunder storms over Madagascar and Seychelles".

The weather conditions at sea may well have blown northwards to and around the coast of Kenya and Tanzania, for at the same period a sub-adult Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata* was found 220 km inland at Tsavo in Kenya, while a newspaper reports the first record of the Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus rochii* in Natal around the same time.

The only previous record of an albatross in Kenya waters is that of Bednall (1956, *Ibis* 98: 138), a sight record in June 1955 of a bird seen in Mombasa and identified as *D. melanophrys*. The acquisition now of a specimen of *D. cauta* casts doubt on the validity of the earlier record, for the species are uncommonly alike.

Readers' attention is drawn to the Bednall 1956 reference in 'Birds of Africa' (Brown *et al.* 1982: 482) entitled erroneously as "The sea birds off the southeast coast of Arabia" instead of "Black-browed Albatross at Mombasa".

The paucity of data on *D. cauta* in 'Birds of Africa' prompts this more detailed account of the Kenya specimen.

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